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TAKING ADVENTURE TO NEW HEIGHTS



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CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS
COURTESY OF **CRAIG BROWN**



I lean forward and as we flip through the air, my stomach leaves my body. I am free falling, plummeting to the earth at 120 miles per hour. An inexplicable feeling of invincibility mixed with a humbling sense of my mortality wash over me. Intense adrenaline rushes out every extremity. Somehow, there is a huge grin on my face which wouldn't disappear until long after I arrived back on the ground.



Outside the Iowa State Skydivers club meeting, I pause before opening the door, nervous to take the first step into the world of skydiving. Inside, high-energy videos flash of suited flyers soaring through the air. They intricately weave through formations—in sync, three-dimensional dance routines.

I swear I can already feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins. Can I really go through with this?

As though to put my fears at rest, skydiving instructor Hashem Hashemi-Toroghi walks in with the announcement that he had just passed 16,000 jumps on July 5 of this year. He has a slight Iranian accent and a kind smile, enthusiastically answering any questions the potential skydivers have with the confidence of a man who began skydiving 38 years ago. He is the go-to instructor for Iowa State Skydivers. Not a surprise, as Toroghi has been involved in multiple world-record jumps and is only the 21st person in the United States to have surpassed 16,000 jumps.

I get right to the point: “So, when is the next time you will jump?”

“This Saturday at 8 a.m.,” Toroghi responds.

I instantly feel my stomach lurch, but I agree. I may as well dive right in.



Though tandem—the act of skydiving while strapped to an instructor—is the most widely known form of skydiving, it can be comparable to dipping your toes in the wading pool. Jeremy Dubansky, president of the club, has been skydiving since he was a sophomore at Iowa State. The now senior in software engineering averages 10 jumps a week and spent his summer living at Skydive Chicago in a trailer—where he was able to up that impressive average to 40 jumps per week.

One of Dubansky's favorite jumping experiences included jumping with a wingsuit and a freefly tube, which is basically a long windsock—a risky jump by even experienced standards. Though he was successful with those jumps, using a freefly tube has caused him a couple malfunctions. With over 500 jumps in three years, it's not surprising that he has run into a complication or two. During one particular jump, he fell vertically—arms above him holding onto the freefly tube. As he deployed his chute, the freefly tube wrapped around the lines and became tangled, not allowing the chute to fully open. This is when a reserve parachute is necessary. As he released the line, the reserve chute immediately deployed and he was able to land safely.

“Our sport is really three-dimensional,” Dubansky says. “If you drop one knee, you will turn that way. Once you learn how to move the air around your body, you can really do anything. It's more of a mind sport because it doesn't require physical strength, but the knowledge to do the moves correctly.” Dubansky was trained by Toroghi at the beginning of his skydiving career.

When Toroghi came to Iowa State as a grad student from Iran, he had not planned to leave his path to economics to become a skydiving instructor experienced enough to train other instructors. He happened upon an Iowa State Skydivers' poster in 1976 and signed up for the only skydiving option at that time. Solo static line is a practice where skydivers jump out at 3,500 feet with the parachute deploying immediately upon leaving the plane.

"When I teach people, it changes their life," Toroghi says of the reasons he loves skydiving. He finds satisfaction when he takes a tandem student or trains an Accelerated Freefall (AFF) student. Though 16,000 jumps can take adrenaline out of the equation, it has been a method of relaxation for Toroghi, allowing him to unwind and concentrate solely on his jump. His highest jump was at 26,000 feet and one of his world record jumps was in Ottawa, Illinois in 1998, where he was one of 246 people to jump in freefall formation.



Rounding up some equally adventurous—or insane—friends before the sun fully rises on a Saturday morning, we arrive at the Boone Municipal Airport with excitement building as we approach the smallest plane I have ever seen. Greeted by Toroghi and a hangar filled with old, mismatched couches, rugs and parachutes, we are asked to sign away our lives. I can't count how many times "death" is mentioned between the forms and the video we watch. But don't worry because you are more likely to die in a car accident or get struck by lightning. Comforting.

I volunteer to brave the new experience first—I really just don't want to chicken out if I see someone else go before me. Toroghi straps me tight into my harness—a tedious, but necessary process—and we make our way to the plane. "There's no turning back now," Craig Brown teases as I climb into the cramped quarters. The former Skydivers club member returned from Chicago to shoot my jump. I take one last look at my friends and give a thumbs up and a smile as the door is closed.

I focus on my breathing and the distant ground as we take our assent. I try not to pay attention to the fact that I am seated in the smallest plane I have seen with orange shag carpet for the interior and a red foam floor

that is worn-through right where you are supposed to put your knee as you prepare to jump out. Brown and Clark Coffman, the club's academic adviser, reassure me that the plane is in great condition—despite how the interior looks. "This is all from people's fingernails," they joke as I look at all of the scratches on the doorframe. "Really reassuring," I muse.

Coffman has an altimeter on his glove, which shows how high we are in thousands of feet. Given the lack of personal space, I find it hard to look away from the altimeter as it slowly climbs. 3,000 feet. 4,000 feet. 5,000 feet. At 7,000 feet, I am given the command to switch my seated position to my knees as Toroghi straps our harnesses together. 9,000 feet. When we are all set to go, pilot Tom Borer gives the signal to open the door. I catch my breath. I'm inches away from the open sky.

"Lean back," Toroghi orders. Brown climbs out and faces me to start filming.

"Hands and head out," Toroghi calls. I wrap both hands around the scratched-up doorframe.

"Left foot out!" In sync with Toroghi, I step my left foot out onto the plane's outer step while bringing my right knee to the edge of the doorframe.

"Arch!" I bring my hands to the sides of my face with elbows out, look up and arch my back.



Our cues, given to us in our brief training with Toroghi earlier that morning, were simple. Important to our safety, but easy to remember. We began by lying on our stomachs on the floor to practice our arches. Knees apart, feet together (the harness makes it impossible to close your knees anyway). Hands at your face, elbows out. This is important to be sure we end up with our bellies down after the jump. Moving

to the plane, we each practice our steps as Toroghi calls out the orders.

Toroghi's instruction, "Arch like a son-of-a-gun," was the only thing on my mind as I leaned forward into the open sky. When I finally get my bearings—and my stomach back—after the leap, the view is breathtaking. Not a single cloud in the sky, the sun still low in mid-morning. An intricate puzzle of fields in all shades of green and brown spread before me. A river snakes through the puzzle, lined with a deep green row of trees. In that moment, I was soaring. I didn't feel the 120 miles per hour I was travelling. Time had almost stopped. Then—too quickly—I am jerked up-right by the opening of the parachute and my freefall is over.

As Toroghi and I float to the earth, I take the reigns of the parachute. He guides my movements, and we twirl in circles as I pull down the chute first to the right, and then to the left. I squeal and laugh like I'm a child on a roller coaster ride, letting off the pent-up energy the adrenaline had given me from the jump.

We practice the landing a few times—no wind means we land seated—high above the ground. When we land for real, I kick up my legs as high as my restricting harness will allow and yank the parachute handles down hard. The ground meets us much softer than I anticipated and I am left with one thought—"Can I go back up?"



Wish you were there? Check out the video of Dallas skydiving on our website!

